

Play as a Driving Factor in a Child's Development of Language Skills

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Abstract

There are misconceptions in some of the Luhya community in Busia County in Western Kenya on the value of play in children's general development. Some of the parents in Busia County find no substantial value of play. They see play as a mere noise making and waste of children's time of engagement in a more academic activities such as reading, writing, and solving mathematical problems while in nursery or class one. This theoretical article explains the value of play in children's language skills and gives some suggestions on what educationists and county governments in the Western Kenya should do to develop positive attitude among parents toward children's play.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Play, Children, Language Skills.

Introduction

Young children participate in many activities both at school and at home. Most of the activities are performed when children are engaged in a play. Many educationists defined play in their perspectives of the level of participants. Play is an activity in which children engage in with enthusiasm and for long time if left uncontrolled. Children value play because of the interest they have that makes them interact freely with each other. The importance of play in a child's development is grounded in Vygotsky's theory that children learn at the time they are in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which encompasses play. Vygotsky believed that play such as representational creates an imaginary situation that permits the child to explore undesired needs. Play according to Vygotsky, contains rules for behavior that the child should follow to be successful in a play situation (Mooney, 2000). This theoretical study intends to defuse the established assumption by some parents in Luha community in western Kenya that children's play is a mere noise making.

Importance of play in a child's development

Play has a significant impact in a child's development both physically, mentally and socially. It appears to be the source and a motivator for eagerness to learn, and to think creatively. Infants begin learning about the surrounding environment immediately after birth. After sometime, they begin using water, sand, mud, stones, flowers, and sometimes wood in their play. Some of the items that interest children are commercially manufactured and may look sophisticated to younger children. These materials whether natural or manufactured, provide learning opportunities and build relationships that are developed through sharing of the materials during play.

The following picture shows children engaged in a play



When children play using materials, they begin counting some objects or materials which is a process that consequently becomes mathematics as they grow older. In the course of playing, children talk and it is

through this interaction that some simple words are developed depending on the age.

Do teachers and parents know that play, plays a major role in children's development in language skills, cognitive skills, manipulative skills, social relationships, strengthens their bodies, and that it stimulates and arouse interests in children? When teachers and parents participate with children in play, they increase children's ability to think constructively and develop good relationships between their peers, teachers, and their parents. Children learn as they play and increase their vocabulary covering many topics. Parents and teachers need to build and strengthen the vocabulary that has been developed by children during play.

At times, young children play according to age, interest, and sex. Young boys may have their interest in playing football or soccer, playing with vehicle dolls, and constructing houses. Young girls are likely to have their interest in playing with baby dolls, imitating cooking, and playing with water in bottles. Young children are creative and they use any material to create and make things according to their imaginations. Linskie (1983) said:

"Anyone who has watched young children at play will surely have noticed how creative they are. A simple white cloth becomes a bridal veil, a tent, or a Roman toga, depending on which bit of imagery is at play at the moment" (p. 239).

A play may comprise several segments of short plays that develop and improve various abilities in children. Motor or physical play improves children's locomotive skills and strengthens body muscles. Social play encourages interaction thus shaping social behavior in children. They learn and follow their play rules and sometimes take roles according to the requirements of their game. Such fantasy plays develop confidence and cooperation in the children. The plays that involve taking roles develop leadership skills, organizational skills, while instilling morals and their cultural values. Children at times engage in constructive plays where they build houses, use clay or mud to model people, animals, and vehicles. Children become happy and proud after modeling animals or people from clay. Their pride gives them other opportunities to imagine what to create using other materials. Children exchange ideas as they play. Even those who are not talkative get stimulated and become motivated to start talking.

Play as a vehicle of language development in children

The development of language skills is one of the learning tools that should be encouraged and improved by teachers. Play works as a vehicle for the transformation of what a child would like to be in future. It develops and improves various skills including attitudes and physical abilities. Vygotsky believed that much of the children's learning takes place when they play. He also believed that language and development build on each other (Mooney, 2000). According to Feldman (2000), play serves an important purpose in the development of social, cognitive, and physical skills. He explained that at the age of four, children engage in constructive play in which they manipulate objects in order to produce or build something. It provides children with an opportunity to test their developing physical and cognitive skills as they perform various activities individually or in groups. When children play together, they gain experience in solving problems as they exchange ideas. In a social aspect of play, children engage in more social play that involves interaction with their playmates. A play such as pretend play involves children in imaginative activities that develop and encourage interaction, cognitive skills, language skills, and self-control.

It is during play that children become creative and imaginative in thinking and in the creation of new ideas. Allen and Goetz (1982) pointed out that "beyond cultural and familial influence; social skills are predominantly developed and improved through play. The role of play in the children's physical and mental development is a part of the theories that the theorists including Piaget, Froebel, Pestalozzi had said that children learn to cooperate, gain new skills and change their attitudes towards others" (p.119). Play improves several skills such as jumping, running, and clapping including talking. Crain (2005) said that "preschool play enhances cognitive capacities such as problem solving and creativity as well as the ability to imagine things from others' perspectives" (p. 388). Teachers should give their children an opportunity to play and explore the environment around them. When children are given an opportunity to play, they generate some knowledge that a teacher may not have taught in the classroom.

Play encompasses many of the teaching and learning strategies that contribute to children's language skills, motor skills, social, emotional, and intellectual development. In most cases, when children play, they tend to be making noise and yet through that noise, effective communication takes place thus increasing their abilities to listen carefully while developing a wide range of vocabularies. It might be noise but the players themselves understand each other and build relationships. Parents and teachers need to build and strengthen the vocabulary that has been developed by children during play.

Contribution of teachers and parents

Most parents who may have little knowledge on how children learn do not allow children to play and make noise near them or outside their houses. Children are usually ordered to go away and not to make noise in the proximity. At times, those who make noise are chased and caned by their parents especially fathers.

A picture showing a parent chasing children who were making noise while playing



Many parents fail to understand that there is no empty noise or noise that has no purpose. Teachers especially those teaching young children should sensitize and enlighten parents on why children should be allowed to play and sometimes assisted with play materials.

Teachers and parents should encourage children to engage in conversations thus developing language skills and problem-solving. They should provide materials if needed in a play and discuss with the children about some themes in the play. The role of a teacher in such play is to rehearse the children on what they have to do in the course of the play, what they have to say and avail the materials to be used in the play. This type of play significantly develops and improves both language and manipulative skills.

Teachers and parents should develop a culture of listening to what children say when they are engaged in imaginative plays. Regardless of culture or color, children have the ability to imitate their parents and teachers' ways of speaking and actions. To widen children's vocabulary and instill language skills, the parents and teachers should provide the children with picture books along with other play materials. Pictures and toys develop children's imaginative and language skills, and also inspire the children to read and write.

After playing, children should be washed and change to another activity or activities. Showing children pictures or teaching them how to read simple words will increase their language skills.

How school administrators, teachers, and parents view children's play

Children's play has lost its recognition as a learning practice among teachers, school administrators, and parents. As parents, Teacher's Service Commission, and the Kenyan Ministry of Education stress on passing National Examinations, teachers concentrate on academics and reduce playing time or deny children their playing time on their school timetable. Parents, who should encourage and play with their children, take it as a waste of time. They tell or command their children to stop playing and take a book to read or look at pictures. They fail to realize that play is the major subject of learning that prepares children for the academics. It develops children's cognitive and language skills, physical fitness, social interaction, increases children's vocabulary, relieves their emotions, and develops leadership skills as they dramatize taking roles. Dramatization and role-play are play activities that develop children's language skills and widen their vocabulary. Effective language teachers normally plan to put their children in situations such as drama and role-play where they can express themselves freely and gain confidence.

Teachers should understand that play is another aspect of children's learning and therefore, they should organize their children and be around to regulate and assist their children during the play. Venn and Jahn (2004) indicated that "the thriving of cognitive, social, and emotional development depends on children's ability to acquire oral language, the ability to think symbolically and the ability to self-regulate" (p.78). The authors maintain that playing in small groups enhances and motivates vocabulary growth in young children. When

children acquire new words, they become talkative and develop language skills. Vygotsky believed that “language presents the shared experiences necessary for building cognitive development” (Mooney, 2000, p. 90). United States Department of Education (2005) encouraged teachers and parents to give their children opportunities to play. Parents and teachers should put their children in a situation that would prompt them to engage in talking. According to Leong and Bodrova (October, 2003) play has the most profound effect on language skills and literacy development especially during dramatic play. In drama, children use imagination, creativity, and many other materials to imitate the real life situation where they use words and expressions that reveal the theme of the drama. It is through play that children enhance language skills by singing, talking, rhyming, and word play help to master the rules and sounds of language as they enjoy making fun. Leong (July-August, 2009) supported the idea of using drama to reinforce the development of language skills in young children. It is during this time that children navigate a variety of language skills which they apply to make the play lively and enjoyable.

Whether it is drama, role play or any other play, children develop language skills and other various skills. It is through play that children develop oral and written language skills as they talk to each other. Leong referring to Garvey (1990) pointed out that phonology (sounds of language), grammar, and meaning are all playfully explored as children engage in their free choice activities.

Children’s play does not mean anything useful to many people including parents. It is through play that even an infant get to recognize some sounds. John and Eve (March, 2008) said that language learning is an ongoing process during every day activities as children reflect their past experience. When children engage themselves in role play, they develop language and communication skills. Through play, children explore their creativity imaginative skills. Kids learn how to cooperate, how to negotiate, and how to get along with others who may have very different ideas. This experience develops the skills children need as they make their way in the world. Through role play, children develop positive attitudes, and language skills that make them be more responsible in their families. Murray-Nellis (2009) said that:

“When a child pretends to be a mom or a doctor or a teacher, she is learning to see the reality from a different perspective. When a child plays the role of a doctor, a mom or a teacher, she is also learning to be responsible where managerial, supervisory and language skills are applied” (Dec. 2009).

Through play, a child learns to reflect what he or she has seen adult do, how they speak, and what they say in such circumstances. The child imitates and through imitation he or she develops language skills, leadership skills, socialization, and cooperation.

Many authorities repeatedly emphasize the need for parents and teachers to give children an opportunity to have enough time to play. McFadden (2010) pointed out that play in early childhood has a significant role in social, language, physical, and cognitive development in children. Play according to McFadden, presents children with many problem-solving opportunities that involve them in talking and making decisions on what they should play or change the fashion of the play. In play, children talk and sometimes cry when irritated by their playmates or when what an individual is making is not coming as expected. This provides for them to grow cognitively and learn to take chances of trying other ways. In such circumstances, children learn to work together where cooperation is fostered. According to McFadden, children learn to solve conflicts by talking to each other. Solving conflicts through communication, improves children’s language skills and reasoning ability. It is through play that children discover the importance of working together and sharing the available play materials.

Children’s play should be regarded as another class room where hidden curriculum takes place with less recognition of parents and teachers. Like other articles, McFadden explains in his article that parents and educators should understand that play is much more than a recreational pastime for children. It is through children’s active play that they acquire and perfect many of the prerequisite skills that contribute to successful learning. Referring to Vygotsky, Isbell and Raines (2007) said that “play leads development, with written language growing out of oral language through the vehicle of symbolic representation abilities. They said that play provides a context for children to practice newly acquired skills and also to function on the edge of their developing capacities take on new social roles and challenging tasks” (pp.71-72). Children implement what they have seen or heard adults say in their imaginative play where new words emerge and without knowing, these new words widen their vocabulary and cognitive skills.

Spodek and Saracho (1991) reported similar observation that language is one of the symbolic elements of dramatic play children use to express themselves when playing. They said that both language and objects represent reality and convey meaning in pretend play. According to Spodek and Saracho, young children generally engage in speech play to explore and manipulate numerous principles in their language, maneuvering their actions with verbal descriptions. Speech play according to the authors, promotes the formation of metalinguistic awareness which initiates language skills. Fromberg and Bergen (2006) explained how play takes the first stage to child who begins to speak. They said that a child who gets closer to talking, the verbal play will expand to explore intonation and rhythmic of language as well as the speech sounds. They added that although the baby explores language for the pleasure of the sounds and feelings, and for the social response it creates, this

play with sounds also develops the muscles, vocal skills, and social interaction patterns that form the bases for language. On rare cases children play alone but sometimes when toddlers acquire new words and sounds, they get amused and begin repeating the same sound and end up playing alone talking to himself or herself as Piaget and Vygotsky call it egocentrism. Many educationists have vigorously said that play influences language skills. Vieth (May, 2010) strongly stated that play helps children learn to communicate, share, express emotions and resolve conflicts. It helps develop language and vocabulary skills, even in children who are non-verbal. Vieth added that through play, children learn to express requests, demands and statements using a developing sense of grammar and style and that they improve both gross and fine motor capabilities during play by interacting with different toys and materials.

There are many types of play and all of them develop various skills including language skills in children. Tompkins (undated article) categorized play as a vehicle to the mastery of language, interpersonal relations and for performance of social transactions between individuals. Tompkins emphasized that engaging children in plays enhances language development and encourages genuine communication, active involvement, and a positive attitude towards other members within the play. Play is seen as a strong agent of socialization even to adults playing intercollegiate or international.

DISCUSSION

Classroom situations are not the only provision for learning. Learning occurs both in a classroom and outside. In Kenya, before Dr. Krapf opened his mission school at Rabai in 1847, Africans had their traditional informal education. The African traditional education had no schools or written syllabus to be followed. Furthermore, there were no trained teachers to organize teaching and learning as it is today. Learners acquired knowledge and skills through elder's instructions and play which included drama, role-play, singing, games, riddles, and legends (Ngaroga, 1996). Those activities which were in the form of play developed and improved language and other skills. Through interaction under the guidance of elders especially parents, children developed good relationships and learned the value of sharing, and respect.

If as early as 19th century, parents had understood that children find their interest in plays and that plays contributed to children's socialization and improved their speech, then today's educational policy makers should encourage and support by ensuring that teachers do not ignore the set time for children's play. Educational policy makers and teachers should have some early childhood knowledge which may help them to assist parents in understanding the value of play for young children. If most parents are sensitized on the value of play, they will be able to support and participate in some of those plays. Teachers of young children and parents should provide play areas and materials for their children. Children who acquire sufficient language skills are easily accepted in other play groups and are likely to be confident in their classroom learning (Trawick-Smith, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to explore the value of play in children's development of language skills. The literature review showed that there is a significant contribution of a play in a child's development of language skills. Children acquire language skills when they engage themselves in various types of plays.

The literature strongly advised that children's play should not be regarded as a mere fun but it should be taken as another learning avenue where parents and teachers should be involved. Parents and teachers including child caregivers should provide playing venues and provide a conducive environment including materials (blocks, papers, crayons, picture books, dolls and others) for the purpose of tapping and developing various skills. Since play develops and improves all skills including language, Brown and Marchant (2002) said that parents and teachers should play with their children but not to control and direct the play.

This is a very interesting topic and it is likely that the findings of this study may be used by policy makers, teachers, and parents to improve on the teaching and the acquisition of language skills. Another study should be carried out to bridge the gaps and also to find out whether or not play has any impact on the adults' public speech, socialization, co-operation and respect of others .

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